

Ruth gave him a fat lip for his attempted humor.

Ellis crouched in the doorway; he was first and he looked sick: the ground, to him, looked so very far away. The instructor shouted the preplanned command: "GET OUT." Ellis couldn't hear him over the noise of the propellers, but he read his lips: the crazy son-of-a-bitch was telling him to jump. Ellis stuck his head out the doorway and looked down, then back at the instructor to give him a chance to read lips, too. He said, "FUCK YOU." The instructor understood him but found his answer unacceptable.

Ellis spread-eagled himself and clawed at the four corners of the rectangular doorway, hanging on like a pot-bellied cat as Ruth and the instructor pushed on him and pounded his fingers and stomped on his toes. They finally dislodged him, and as Ruth stood with her hands on her hips, a smug smile on her face, watching her husband plummet toward earth, the instructor, still smarting from the punch in the mouth, gave her a little push and sent her falling, too.

Forget all about Galileo: Ruth roared earthward like a meteor and caught Ellis. She tangled in his just-opened 'chute, and they fell together, pulling and tugging at the twisted fabric above them, cursing and shooting quick and fearful glances at the rapidly approaching ground.

TO KINGDOM COME

Novice sky-divers Ruth and Ellis had a serious mishap on their very first jump: Ellis went first, with Ruth coming right behind him and tangling in his opening 'chute. They clung to each other as they fell, writhing and wrestling to see who would land on top and who would land on the bottom, while Ellis' unopened canopy whipped and snapped uselessly up above. As the earth's surface approached them, they were both convinced that they were on their way to Kingdom Come.

And that's where they'd they'd have gone if Ellis hadn't remembered, three hundred feet from certain death, that he wasn't the only one there wearing a parachute: he pulled Ruth's rip cord and hung on with a bear hug.

The 'chute slowed them, but their velocity at impact was still potentially deadly. But the ground gave way and Ruth and Ellis descended into a large, dark cavern that no white man had ever seen before. Ruth's 'chute snagged and tangled in the roots of an old tree that didn't exist above ground anymore, and she and her husband bounced and swayed on the elastic cords next to a glistening stalactite.

Ruth rubbed her lower back and moaned, "Oh my sacroiliac." Ellis looked around at the pictures on the walls: extinct bovines and mammoths and stick-figure men and their God — a glowing yellow sun....

And he said, "Hey Ruth, are we dead or what?"

SHE'S NINETEEN YEARS OLD

— for Peter Bakowski

It was a back-yard reception, and Bill slunk through the house and elbowed around the fools who were dancing on the patio and made a beeline for the keg out on the lawn. He gulped his first plastic cupful down then poured another and leaned back against the redwood fence to watch the ladies in their hats and Sunday dresses.

"Bill, my man, I need a favor." It was the father of the bride, Hugh. He leaned on the fence next to Bill with a tumbler full of whiskey, his suit coat over his shoulder, his hula girl tattoo peeking through the thick black hair on his forearm.

"Sure, Hugh, what can I do for you?"

"Bill," he says, sipping his whiskey, squinting at the dancers, "my younger daughter's feeling like a bit of a wallflower today. You know how it is, big sister getting married and all."

"Must be rough, Hugh."

"Yeah. Well, what I'd like you to do for me, Bill, is go and ask her to dance, you know, maybe make a play for her."

"I'm a little old for her, aren't I, Hugh?"

"Bull, Bill. What are you? Twenty-five, twenty-six?"

"Thirty-one."

"Oh. Well hell, it doesn't matter anyway; she'll probably turn you down. I just wanna make sure she doesn't get ignored."

She accepted and asked him while they danced to hundred-and-twenty decibel Prince — cupping her hand around his ear and bouncing her warm breath off the side of his face — if he had a car.